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The Lived Experiences of Chinese International Students Preparing for the University-To-Work Transition: A Phenomenological Qualitative Study

Ian M. Lertora
Texas Tech University, ian.lertora@ttu.edu

Jeffrey Sullivan
Sam Houston State, jms107@shsu.edu

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Abstract

Chinese international students have been the largest growing number of international students on U.S. college and university campuses for the last ten years. However, there is minimal research literature that pertains to Chinese international students' experiences on U.S. campuses and currently no research literature that reflects the entirety of their experience studying in the U.S. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to give a voice to Chinese international students who are preparing for the university-to-work transition to better understand their experiences as international students in the United States, specifically the types of transitional stressors they experienced and how they coped with these stressors. Five major themes and the essence of the participants emerged from the data analysis and are presented, discussed, and implication for campus based mental health professionals are provided.

Keywords

Chinese International Students, Transition, Phenomenology, Optimism

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Ian M. Lértora
Texas Tech University, Lubbock, Texas, USA

Jeffrey M. Sullivan
Sam Houston State University, Huntsville, Texas, USA

Chinese international students have been the largest growing number of international students on U.S. college and university campuses for the last ten years. However, there is minimal research literature that pertains to Chinese international students' experiences on U.S. campuses and currently no research literature that reflects the entirety of their experience studying in the U.S. The purpose of this phenomenological qualitative study was to give a voice to Chinese international students who are preparing for the university-to-work transition to better understand their experiences as international students in the United States, specifically the types of transitional stressors they experienced and how they coped with these stressors. Five major themes and the essence of the participants emerged from the data analysis and are presented, discussed, and implication for campus based mental health professionals are provided. Keywords: Chinese International Students, Transition, Phenomenology, Optimism

In 2014 there were 1,078,822 international students, or 5.3% of the total student population, studying at colleges and universities in the United States (U.S.), according to the Institute for International Education (IIE, 2017). The current trajectory of international students on U.S. campuses has been swinging upward steadily since the 2005-2006 academic. In a closer look at the data, it is noteworthy that 32.5% of the international students originated from China. In the Chinese international student (CIS) population alone, there has been a steady increase in number of students attending U.S. institutions.

Universities and colleges in the U.S. have fiscal incentives to recruit international students because of the revenue stream they provide because of the increased out-of-state tuitions and housing costs that they pay. The international student body contributes over 38 billion dollars into the U.S. national economy by way of the various costs associated with living in a foreign country (IIE, 2017). Most international students, over 61% (IIE, 2017), leave home with the consent and financial support of their families to become more employable so that they may better provide for themselves and their families (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Shen & Herr, 2004). However, researchers have reported that despite this support, many CIS believe that their acculturative and academic adjustment needs are not being supported (Bertram, Poulakis, Elsasser, & Kumar, 2014; Li, Wong, & Toth, 2014; Wang et al., 2012; Wang, Wei, & Chen, 2015). A major reason for this lack of support may be because the unique circumstances of CIS are not understood (Bertram et al., 2014; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015).

Chinese international students are at increased risk for emotional challenges resulting from complications with transition, such as depression and anxiety (Bertram et al., 2014;

Hwang et al., 2014; Lin, 2006). These challenges may go untreated because CIS are from cultures where there are negative stigmas toward mental health and counseling, or they have difficulties developing therapeutic rapport with counselors who are not from collectivist backgrounds (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hwang et al., 2014; Li et al., 2013; Wang et al., 2012). Therefore, many CIS may not address emotional complications resulting from difficulties with transition, emotional complications that might be alleviated by visiting a campus-based mental health professional (Lin, 2006; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Yet, to this date, there is no research that focuses on the entirety of the transitional experiences and needs of CIS leading up to the university-to-work transition and how campus-based mental health professionals might best address these transition needs.

There are a number of challenges that CIS experience upon arrival in the host country (Bertram et al., 2014; Lértora, Sullivan, & Croffie, 2017; Lin, 2006; Lowinger, He, Lin, & Chang, 2014), during their stay in the host country (Li, Marbley, Bradley, & Lan, 2016; Lin, 2006; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015), and when they are preparing to graduate, regardless of whether they are staying in the host country or returning home (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Shen & Herr, 2004). These challenges are labeled in the literature as transition shock (Bennett, 1998; McLachlan & Justice, 2009); culture shock (Lin, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2011); acculturative stress (Berry, 1997; Rice, Choi, Zhang, Morero, & Anderson, 2012; Yakunina, Weigold, & Weigold, 2013; Yan & Berliner, 2011); psycho-somatization (Bertram et al., 2014; Liao & Wei, 2014); university-to-work transitions (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Shen & Herr, 2004); and career placement concerns (Arthur & Flynn, 2011; Nunes & Arthur; 2013; Shen & Herr, 2004).

When universities initiate programs that focus on social integration and community involvement, CIS have shown the ability to develop supportive social networks that have helped to mitigate some of the negative transitional effects (Lin, 2006; Tsai & Wong, 2010; Yan & Berliner, 2011). To address CIS' difficulty transitioning to the host culture, several researchers have advocated for implementing comprehensive social integration programs intended to support the success of CIS (Bertram et al. 2013; Lin 2006; Lértora, Henriksen, Starkey, & Li, 2017; Tsai, & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Some researchers have highlighted the importance of campus-wide social integration efforts to help CIS establish aspects of the collectivist culture they are accustomed to in China, specifically a supportive community (Bertram et al., 2014; Lértora, Henriksen et al., 2017a; Lértora, Sullivan et al., 2017b; Wang et al., 2015; Yan & Berliner, 2011; 2013). Lowinger et al. (2014) suggested implementing programs that address acculturation, academic self-efficacy, and language difficulties (Liao & Wei, 2014).

Moreover, regardless of whether CIS attempt to remain in the U.S after graduation, they need to receive services that are pertinent to their unique situations. Researchers report that international students indicate they do not believe they receive the assistance and support needed to successfully navigate their numerous transitions throughout college. leading up to the transition from university-to-work (Arthur & Popaduik, 2010; Crocket & Hays; 2011; Sangganjanavanich et al., 2011; Shen & Herr, 2004). In addition, there is an absence of literature that reflects the transitional support needs of CIS throughout their college experience that culminates in the transition from university-to-work.

If the impact of transitional challenges for CIS goes unattended, there is an increased chance that international students will experience prolonged depressive symptomology (Bertram et al., 2014; Lin, 2006; Mitchell et al., 2007; Wang et al., 2012; Yi et al., 2003), which could impede their goal of increasing opportunities for career advancement due to a lack of self-confidence (Bertram et al., 2014; Lowinger, et al., 2014; Wang et al., 2105). To complicate the situation further, CIS historically have not used mental health services on college campuses until they are near a state of crisis (Crockett & Hays, 2011; Hwang et al.,

2014; Li et al., 2016; Li et al., 2013; Mitchell et al., 2007; Yakushko et al., 2008). Low participation in mental health services for CIS could be due to a failure to develop a therapeutic alliance with mental health professionals who fail to consider their cultural values, such as collectivism, as well as a lack of social acceptability about seeking mental health services among the Chinese community (Bertram et al., 2014; Lin, 2006; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Yi et al., 2003). If international students were able to experience success when transitioning from their home country to university life in the U.S., they may be better prepared for the next transition from university-to-work in the U.S. (Arthur & Flynn; 2011; Lértora et al., 2017b Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Shen & Herr, 2004).

To mitigate the implications of unchecked mental health issues that affect CIS' wellbeing, academic performance, and viability for internships and careers, researchers have made efforts to advance social integration and support services for international students (Bertram et al., 2014; Lowinger et al., 2014; Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2015). Effective social integration and support services have been shown to have positive impacts on the overall satisfaction of both international and domestic students with the college/university experience (Lin, 2006; Owens & Loomes, 2010), which in turn can positively impact their career paths (Norris & Gillespie, 2008; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Shen & Herr, 2004). College counselors, career counselors, and counselor educators could become instrumental in successfully supporting CIS throughout the numerous cultural transitions they experience while studying in the U.S. by developing and implementing social integration services for CIS (Bertram et al., 2014; Lértora, et al., 2017b Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015).

Significance of Study

There are many researchers that have focused on the adjustment experiences of CIS' when they come to the U.S. to attend college or university (e.g., Tsai & Wong, 2012; Wang et al., 2012; Wang et al., 2015; Wong, & Toth, 2013). Some researchers have narrowed the focus of what CIS' initial adjustment experiences are in relation to academic stressors (Liao & Wei, 2014; Lowinger et al., 2014), social integration (Yan & Berliner, 2013), social support (Bertram et al., 2014), and their attitudes seeking help (Li et al., 2016). Recently, researchers have begun to focus on studying the university-to-work transition experiences of international students using a qualitative approach, which includes discussions about the numerous transitions international students face (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Moores & Popadiuk, 2011; Nunes & Arthur; 2013; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). The purpose of this phenomenological study was to give a voice to CIS who are preparing for the university-to-work transition to better understand their experiences as international students in the United States. In this study, the transcendental-phenomenological approach (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994) was used to answer the following research question: *What are the perceptions of near-graduation undergraduate Chinese international students regarding their transitional experiences, and the resulting stressors, throughout their academic careers at a university in the southern region of the United States?*

Methodology

According to Moustakas (1994), "Phenomenology is the *first* method of knowledge because it begins with 'things themselves'" (p. 41). In the following sections, the steps related to preparing to research, data collection, data analysis, and establishing trustworthiness are discussed. The steps used in the qualitative research process are presented

in chronological order for the purpose of affording the opportunity for future researchers to replicate the study. Thematic analysis of the data included the perceptions of a coding team, which the first author assembled to establish intercoder reliability and enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of the identified themes.

Bracketing

Prior to data collection, the first author engaged in a bracketing process to identify potential biases that might interfere with my understanding of the research process and data. Bracketing is a necessary process when conducting a transcendental phenomenological study (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2014). According to Moustakas (1994), bracketing begins when the researchers achieve a mental state called epoché, "in which everything is perceived freshly, as if for the first time" (p. 34). As the lead researcher, the first author had already interacted considerably with the population to be studied, so the first author embarked on a meditative process to actively bracket, or suspend, my interactions and experiences with the Chinese international student population to focus on the research participants' responses with greater awareness of my own biases. Additionally, the first author actively journaled about my past experiences prior to interviewing the participants and the first author was able to more effectively suspend my judgment of the phenomena. Additionally, the first author also processed my emerging experiences with the second author, members of my committee, and the coding team, which allowed for new knowledge to be evident (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994).

The reverence the first author possess for the international student population was a voiced concern going into this research study, and the first author employed numerous methods to alleviate my biases throughout the course of data collection and analysis. The first author actively bracketed my experiences through reflecting, journaling, and debriefing each interaction before and after each interview. Prior to the data analysis, my research team and the first author actively bracketed our biases, concerns, and preconceived notions by writing them down on a list to which we constantly referred to ensure that these biases were not driving our analysis. The first author also debriefed with other peers who had limited or no interactions with international students to reduce my potential biases as much as possible.

Coding Team Orientation and Bracketing

The coding team met early in the research process to discuss the research study in detail. This allowed me the opportunity to orient them to the necessary steps in the data analysis process, which included the process of bracketing and transcendental phenomenological reduction. The coding team consisted of Coder #1, Coder #2, and myself. Coder #1 was a master's counseling graduate from the university that the first author am attending for my doctoral studies, and the university where all the participants attended. During his undergraduate studies, he embarked on a 1-month study abroad trip to Japan. Upon his return to the U.S. he interacted with several international students on a social level but did not develop lasting relationships with his international student acquaintances. Coder #2 was also a master's counseling graduate from the same university as Coder #1, the participants, and myself. She had had no interactions with international students outside of the classroom setting during her undergraduate and graduate studies**.**

To enter a state of epoché, the coding team reflected upon our past interactions with the Chinese international student population and related experiences that pertained to this study. We labeled our prejudgments and biases, shared them with one another, created a comprehensive list of our preconceptions regarding the research study, and brought them

fully into our consciousness. Sources of personal biases identified by the coding team were: use of terms associated with transition that have been described in previous research; having friends that are international students; seeing large groups of international students talking with no American students represented; previous experiences working closely with students in transition; beliefs that this population is underserved; and personal experiences related to international travel. When we engaged in our qualitative data analysis, we referred to the list developed through epoché so that we could "enter freshly, encounter the situation [phenomenon], issue, or person directly, and receive whatever is offered and come to know it as such" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 89).

Role of the Researcher

Due to the close interactions inherent in qualitative research, the first author could not be separated from the phenomenon of study, so it is incumbent to discuss my perspective of the phenomenon (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008). The first author had numerous interactions with the international student populations on college campuses both as a student and professional. My recent interactions during my graduate and doctoral studies stemmed from observing that international students were an underserved population who appeared to be having difficulty with the numerous transitions they faced throughout their time in the U.S.

When the first author became a career counselor on the university campus, the first author was the counselor who serviced the international student population. The first author participated in international student orientations and collaborated with a counselor in the counseling center who had a background as an international student to develop a cohesive referral system. The culmination of my experiences drove my desire to advocate for better international student services. My interactions with international students in this capacity have enriched my outlook on the community.

Data Collection

In the following subsections, we articulate the data collection process and include: Participant selection, demographic questionnaire; focus group semi-structured interview and analysis; and, individual semi-structured interview.

Participant Selection

This study consisted of degree-seeking CIS enrolled in university courses in the final two years of their schooling at a mid-sized institution in Texas. A combination of purposeful and snowball sampling to acquire the participants (Patton, 2014). After receiving Institutional Review Board approval, participants at a large university in Texas were recruited through email invitations sent by staff members in the International Office and through person-to-person contact. The five participants in the study accounted for 35% of the targeted population, which has been deemed adequate for phenomenological studies (Onwuegbuzie & Collins, 2007). The participant sample consisted of three males and two females whose ages ranged from 21-23 (M = 22). Three participants were in their senior year and two participants were in their junior year.

Demographic Questionnaire

The demographic questionnaire was administered prior to the semi-structured interview and took approximately ten minutes for all five participants to complete. The

questionnaire provided participants the opportunity to share information about the following areas: (a) participant's age; (b) gender; (c) country of origin; (d) previous international travel; (e) length of time in the U.S.; (f) years of college experience; (g) location of relatives in the U.S.; (h) if they have plans of remaining in the U.S. after graduation; (i) If they have used counseling services on campus; and (j) have they used campus-based career services. There were five Likert scaled items which rated the following: (1) their experience with campus counseling services; (2) their experience with campus-based career services if they have been used; (3) their perceived level of English proficiency; (4) the first author feel supported by my university during my upcoming transition from university to work; and (5) circle the number that represents your level of English proficiency. The open-ended question was written and designed with the intention of helping the participants focus on their experiences before the interview was conducted (Moustakas, 1994). After reviewing the questionnaire and taking the time to establish rapport with the participants, the first author began the semi-structured focus-group interview process.

Focus Group Semi-Structured Interview and Analysis

The focus group interview was instituted for the purpose of developing the questions that would be used to guide the individual semi-structured interviews. For the focus group, the first author used a semi-structured interview consisting of nine open-ended questions that were based on the previous research literature. The grand tour questions used during the focus group were designed by the authors, reviewed by fellow faculty members, reviewed by a staff member who has extensive service with international students, and informed through an extensive review of the literature. The questions selected for use for the focus group interview were: (a) what thoughts come to mind when you think about transitioning from being a student to a being a professional; (b) when in your college career did you begin to consider your life after college; (c) what have been your biggest influences on the decision of what to do after graduation; (d) what is it like to be getting closer to the end of your college experience in the U.S.; (e) what have you done to plan for your career after graduation; (f) What type of support are you aware of at your university; (g) what type of support have you received from your university; (h) what motivated you to seek support from the university; and (i) what challenges did you experience in seeking support from the university and how did you overcome those challenges?

Before conducting the focus group interview, the participants and the first author shared a family style home cooked dinner to establishing rapport and giving participants a sense of comfort. After dinner, the first author reviewed the informed consent form and the demographic survey with the participants and provided them the opportunity to ask questions, which took about 20 minutes. The focus group interview itself lasted about one hour and the data collected from the focus group interviews was sent to a professional confidential transcription company to be transcribed.

Upon receipt of the transcribed data, and after the coding team was fully oriented to the study and analyzed the data using a basic process of thematic analysis as described by Huberman and Miles (1994). An intercoder agreement of 75% between coding team members was reached thus solidifying the validity of the themes. The resulting themes were used to inform the development of the semi-structured individual interview questions to gain a deeper and more focused understanding of the participants' experiences (Lunenberg & Irby, 2008).

Individual Semi-Structured Interview

The individual interviews were conducted in locations that were both confidential and comfortable for each of the participants. The final questions that were agreed upon to use in individual interviews were: (a) how did you make friends when you first got here; (b) how do you deal with being so far away from home; (c) what would you say has been the biggest difficulty adjusting from the Chinese way of learning to the "American way" of learning and how did you manage to become successful; (d) think for a moment about the times you could have used help from the university…what type of help did you need; (e) what are some things you have done since arriving here to help with learning more English and getting to know American culture; (f) describe how it feels knowing that if you don't find a job right away that you will have to go back home or go into a graduate program; (g) all of you spoke about having to work harder than American students. Can you explain a little more about that; (h) describe for me what you have done to prepare for your career; (i) what does stress look like to you; (j) how do you manage your stress; and (k) what has been your strongest influence on what you do after graduation and why.

The duration of individual interviews was between 18-32 minutes and were conducted at a time that was favorable for the participants. Observations of the participants took place throughout the entirety of the interactions with the participants of the study. the first author detailed my observations of the participants, as well as my reactions to the participants, during my reflexive journaling, which took place following each semi-structured interview. Being the primary researcher and sole interviewer, the first author also took the time to journal the week before the first interview and immediately after the completion of each interview.

Data Analysis

As with the focus group, we used the model of thematic analysis recommended by Huberman and Miles (1994) to depict the lived experiences of individuals from the viewpoint of these individuals in relation to a phenomenon or singular concept (Creswell, 2013; Moustakas, 1994). First, as we did when we initially bracketed our experiences prior to beginning the study, the coding team and the first author entered epoché, which is a position where our judgments were deferred through constant inspection and journaling about the biased ideas related to the phenomenon. Second, the individual interviews were analyzed through to categorize significant statements into lists that had no repetition or overlap, and data that did not pertain to the subject was eliminated or used to highlight deviant cases. Third, each member of the coding team wrote margin notes and reflexive passages about the identified participant responses, which were organized into a draft summary sheet (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Fourth, we generated descriptions and meanings, accumulated from the draft summary sheet, that were organized into preliminary themes. Fifth, we reviewed verbatim excerpts and included them in the descriptions of the CIS' experiences. Sixth, we engaged in deliberations to compare key phrases, reformulate and group key phrases into separate categories, and develop preliminary themes that relate to the data (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Finally, we developed a coding manual comprised of the themes and subthemes, which we then applied to the transcription data. The resulting coding manual constituted the themes we agreed best represented the experiences of participants in study.

The research team then used the coding manual to independently code the all of the individual interview data to establish intercoder reliability of at least 80% for each transcript (Bakeman & Gottman, 1997; Marques & McCall, 2005). To ensure continued intercoder agreement, all three members of the research team independently coded 100% of the data

(Marques & McCall, 2005) and nightly meetings accounted for discrepant coding and coder drift. Upon analysis of the first coding, the research team returned the following percentages for the five independent transcripts: 75.1%, 82%, 80.1%, 80.0%, and 77.8%. The research team reviewed and discussed the coding results of each individual interview that was below 80% and clarified discrepancies to solidify our collective understanding of the agreed upon themes in the coding manual. Of the five transcripts that were coded there were two that did not meet the required 80% intercoder agreement. The coding of the two transcripts was discussed amongst the coding team to determine the discrepancies and were independently recoded. The intercoder reliability results of the recoding were 86.1% and 86.9%. We then took time to walk away from the data to reflect and continued to actively bracket our experiences. We returned to the data a week later, thus remaining in epochè throughout the data analysis process.

After data analysis and the results were written and for member checking purposes all the participants were sent the results to ensure the emergent themes and essence were truly representative of their experience (Creswell, 2011). Three of the five participants responded to the member checking request and confirmed that the results accurately reflected their experiences.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

Triangulation is the use of multiple and different sources of data and methods of generating data in order to provide corroborating evidence (Creswell, 2013). To establish triangulation of the data, there were three sources of data collection in this study: (a) a demographic questionnaire that included open-ended questions; (b) participants' responses during the semi-structured focus group interview; and (c) participants' responses to the semi-structured individual interview questions. We incorporated Huberman and Miles' (1994) thematic analysis, integrated an initial focus group interview, analyzed focus group data to inform individual interview questions, and analyzed 100% of the data via coding team to ensure an inter-coder agreement of at least 80%.

Results

The analysis led to the identification of five emergent themes and the resulting essence that embody the lived experience of CIS as they prepare for the transition from university to work. The six overarching themes were as follows: Family Connection; Working Harder than Others; Feeling Really Stressed; Importance of Social Support; and Uncertainty about the University to Work Transition.

Theme One: Family Connection

For all the participants, being an ocean apart and thousands of miles away from their parents was difficult. Regardless of the distance, advances in social media have made remaining in contact with far away family much easier and cheaper than it ever has been. Likewise, it also provided parents with the opportunity to reinforce their influence on their children's futures. All five participants supported the emergent theme of Family Connection, which was divided into sub themes: Family Support and Parental Influence.

Family support. Participants reported that due to the distance and cost of travel between China and the U.S., CIS are not able to frequently visit home or have their family visit them. Min looked down solemnly at the floor when she mentioned home, "is too far away. So, last time, I went back home, it's already two years ago." However, she instantly

perked up when she exclaimed, "but last summer, my parents come!" The participants responses highlighted the longing that they felt based on the sheer distance of travel and the infrequency of visits back to the country of origin or their parents visiting them in the U.S. This carried over to how often they remained in contact using technology (e.g. Face Time) and social media (e.g. Face Book).

Responses about the frequency of participants' familial contact ranged from talking with parents daily to speaking with extended family once a month. Min spoke to staying in constant contact to make up for the lack of visits. She smiled big when she said, "for me, it's every night. I try but this semester is too busy, so…still, maybe, several times a week." The participants felt the support from their parents by way of the daily, weekly, and monthly check-ins that they had with their parents and loved ones in their countries of origin. This allowed the parents and loved ones to maintain a constant presence in their lives despite the distance between them. However, it also allowed the parents to maintain a constant influence in the lives of their children.

Parental influence. Four of the five participants discussed how much they involve their parents in their future plans, whether it be to return home or attempting to stay in the U.S. When asked to describe the strongest influence on life after graduation, Hua responded without hesitation, "I would say parents" and when asked why, he exclaimed laughing, "They are my parents!" He continued, "Yeah, my parents pushed me pretty hard…yeah, go get an internship…go to work, like…get a good grades." Through frequent contact with parents the participants felt the constant influence of their parents on their career trajectories. For some participants the influence was to go back and work in their countries of origin upon graduation, but for others the influence was more to gain stability in the U.S. so the rest of the family could come join them. Either way, it was made clear that the parents' voices were ever present in the decisions of the participants.

Theme Two: Working Harder than Others

Throughout the focus group and individual interviews, all five participants spoke extensively about feeling as if they constantly must work harder than the domestic students and was separated into the following sub themes to further examine the participants' responses.

Connecting and staying connected. Unlike many domestic students, which may already have friends on a university campus before they arrive, CIS are not typically coming to a university where they already know someone. For someone who is shyer, like Hua, it can be a constant challenge to get out and meet new people. Hua explained that, "one factor cause me stressful, like y-you don't want to hang out buts it's a good chance to know people-know more people ... Yeah, I don't have an option." When Hua did decide to go out, he described another issue he encountered that caused him significant stress,

I didn't do much research before the first author hang out with friend in China but in America, the first author was like, 'What's the rule of the American football? Yeah. Like, 'What is rodeo?' Okay? So, the first author ask google every time the first author hang out with people!"

In order to connect and stay connected with other students in the U.S. participants often had multiple hurdles to overcome that many domestic students may not experience. Some hurdles were more personal such as shyness, and others related directly to their international student status such as language and a lack of understanding "American pastimes."

Definitely the language barrier. Learning at a college level in a secondary or tertiary language is a daunting task. All the participants spoke at great lengths about the constant

challenge that the language barrier posed for them. Yin shared his frustration about how the process of constantly translating from English to Chinese impacts his learning, "Yeah I think ummm the reading parts yeah like some reading sentences ... we directly translate word to word from English to Chinese and we lose some meaning." He paused for a moment to search for the words in English before he continued by stating "I think this is the most difficult because when I try to write something and do some reviews and understand what my professor talking about … my analysis maybe a little bit different from they want to express."

The constant translation process that CIS go through as they try to understand lectures, use of idioms, instructions, and assignments can be exhausting. There is a considerable amount of extra time, effort, and energy that is needed for them to make sense of their time in class, which still may elicit an understanding that is not in line with their professors' directives. The frustration and fatigue that builds as a result of the time spent carries over into their class work.

American way of learning. The discussion about academic adjustments and difficulties continued when Min explained in China, we study for the test-only for test, we can remember things, we can learn the skill how to do the test...but, in here [U.S], in the class, we have to think. We have to communicate with the professor, they ask question, and we response, and, uh, more writing than multiple choice

Hua also noted that "sometimes you do have to work with others in a group to w-work, uh, c-common assignment w-with people, like more teamwork, Yes. Since I was in a Chinese college for two years, I never been in a teamwork assignment." The experiences in class further accentuate how the language difficulties impacted their abilities to respond during discussions, get clarification on what was said, and when working in small groups with domestic students. The constant working at understanding the academic environment added to the academic and acculturative stress they were already experiencing.

Theme Three: Feeling Really Stressed

The theme of Feeling Really Stressed was supported by all five participants' responses and was discussed in the context of feeling that they have to work harder than others throughout their collegiate experiences. Tu shared the consequence when she exclaimed, "I'm stressed out, I-and I feel like a lot of things-usually when I stress out, I- is when I have a lot of stuff to do and not enough time to start!" The participants also described how stress affected them physically and mentally. Lin, a nursing major who often spoke of health ramifications, explained that "stress…. like, being sick, like, because your im-immune s-system is, like, depressed, um. Yeah. Or-or mentally, um, just not feeling happy. Um, then you have t-trouble to, like, focus." When one of the female particpants was asked if she ever felt any physical effects of stress she exclaimed, "one time, I-I didn't have my period for three months! I didn't notice that because stress. " Hua also mentioned that, "if I feel stress, I can't fall into sleep."

Stress management. When the participants discussed stress, they often followed up with explanations about how they attempt to manage the stress levels so they can continue to perform academically. All the participants became visibly stressed, as evidenced by the tension in their voices and pained facial expressions, when discussing their experiences of stress, but as they discussed the strategies they use to manage the stress they became more relaxed. Activities like playing video games, going to the gym, being outside, making to-do lists, and adjusting their due dates for assignments were all mentioned as ways the participants mitigated stress.

An aspect important to minimizing acculturative stress, and stress in general, was highlighted when Lin explained shared that some social sacrificing took place keep stress

manageable, "Yeah, like right now, I just cut my time spending-going to a party or do other, um, like, playing games, yeah. But I still go to the gym and do exercise." This displays that the participants felt they must prioritize their management academic stress over acculturative stress, when research has shown that social support helps to reduce the presence of both.

Theme Four: Importance of Social Support

An important factor in successfully adjusting to college life for any student is developing a social support network with people on campus and throughout the community. Many students find social support through the friends they make on campus, in their classes, and through community based organizations. All five of the participants supported the emergent theme Importance of Social Support, or developing a social support network with people on campus and throughout the community

Importance of friends. The participants all stated that making friends in the United States was important for them, like when Hua shared what his first year was like

yeah, in my first year, it was very hard life. Especially, I didn't get that many friends in my first year. Here, I-I feel so lonely…it was very hard…especially the first year, I will go hang out with people even if I don't want to go hang out with them since that's a-a chance for me to a-get-know more people

The participants employed strategies like trying to connect with CIS before arriving to campus, using CIS to help them meet people, joining campus activity clubs, or through religious organizations.

Classroom friendships. As the participants began to talk more about how they have met friends on campus it became clear the classroom environment was a place they met the most new people. Hua explained, "during the class time like if there is a question I don't know I ask uh people who sit beside me or people who sit aside me a-and uh we start to, like, talk." Many of the early friendships described were limited to just within the actual classroom. Through additional questioning it became apparent that the further into their majors of study the participants were the more meaningful the friendships became. Lin corroborated this idea when he shared, "right now the people I hang out with, they're all in nursing program."

Theme Five: Uncertainty about University-to-Work Transition

All of the participants spoke with uncertainty about the transition from university to work. After graduation, many domestic students have the option to return to their parent's house while they look for employment. However, if CIS want to stay in the U.S. after graduation, they have very little time to be indecisive because of strict demands with the visa paperwork timeline. Throughout most of the interview, Lin was relaxed and comfortable, but something shifted when he was asked about how he felt as he got closer to graduation. He took a long pause and his smile left his face when he said:

I feel really stressful, so I'm not re-I feel like I'm not ready for the-the career field…it seems pretty intimidating to me. 'Cause you-your gonna by yourself …I don't know what's the life gonna be like. It seems really scary to me but um…plus, I don't, like, I'm not sure I will-I can have a secure-like, I cannot secure a job yet since international status, so i-it's kinda intimidating.

If paperwork is not completed, an approved employment site is not located, or they do not find a company to sponsor their visas, they must return to China without having any professional working experience in the U.S. This reality led the participants to employ different strategies to increase their employability in the U.S. an in China such as: Selecting

high demand majors that may be against their own interests; selecting and additional major; avoiding a specialty to broaden their professional opportunities; slowing down their studies to increase the amount of time they have to make professional connections; and, seriously considering attending graduate school in the U.S.

Essence: Optimism Under Pressure

The essence of the lived experiences of CIS as they prepare for the transition from university to work emerged after the data analysis was completed. What became clear was that there were numerous interconnected factors creating uncertainty in the participants' outlook on successfully transitioning from university to work. They are under a cultural pressure to perform, academically and professionally, and feel minimally supported by their campus community throughout their collective journey. The perceived lack of a supportive community added to participants' feelings of isolation that negatively impacted confidence and self-efficacy, thus contributing to more feelings of uncertainty. However, the participants remained optimistic about current and future situations, even when struggling socially, academically, and professionally.

Each participant employed optimism to fuel their motivations to perform under pressure, and to continue working hard to achieve their goals for themselves, their families, and their communities back in China. Optimism became the primary coping skill used in managing the stress that results from their numerous transition stressors and the cultural pressure they feel to perform and achieve. Lin said through a smile "I don't know. It's always just a mess. I think just always being optimistic. Like, right now, I'm failing all three of my classes. Yeah, it's just hard, but I still have the faith to pass." Tu mentioned the mental benefits of being able to persevere through the stressful situations when she mentioned:

> When I got over that barrier, I feel much more confidence about myself and I feel like I can definitely do better next time. I learn a lot. And I feel it's challenging, but if I pass the challenge, I feel more, like, um, s-self-actualized.

Hua explained his daily philosophy he employs to remain optimistic:

> I'm not the kind of person looking back into the past. I only focus on right now and tomorrow and that's uh only two days… since change rapidly and uh I have experienced the [change] goes to complete opposite direction as I thought and so, s-so my-my thought is to f-focus on now and tomorrow. I-if … I have done this, I feel it's much better for me … focus on now and tomorrow rather than looking forward …. Yeah, after I-I turn my focus on my today and tomorrow and I feel something that you saw would be a problem will not be a problem any longer.

After processing Hua's response, I asked how he kept his mind from wandering to the future. Hua paused and smiled, then continued to explain:

> Try not to think about it. Yeah, since even if you think about it, you can't do much about that. That's one reason that I only focus on today and tomorrow. Focus on what I can do rather than something I cannot control.

Discussion

Family Connection

All participants spoke to the importance of Family Connection as being central to their transitional experience. These findings are consistent researchers that stated international students use numerous communication methods to remain in contact with friends and family in their home countries (Khawaja & Stallman, 2011; Savicki, 2010). Because the participants had limited opportunities to visit home, or have their family come visit, due to cost and difficulty of travel, they relied heavily on video chat technology (e.g., Skype) to stay connected to their family members. This allowed their parents to stay involved and influential regarding academic and professional decisions, which directly affected their transition experiences as represented in previous literature (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Nunes & Arthur, 2013; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014). One realizations in the sub-theme Familial Presence was four of the five participants' parental situations directly influenced their options of career placement after graduation. This finding supports previous research about familial influence on international students' job searches and career placement (Arthur & Popadiuk, 2010; Popadiuk & Arthur, 2014; Shen & Herr, 2004).

Working Harder than Others

All the participants reported navigating the language barrier as being a significant part of their experiences, as well as a constant stressor. When paired with cultural values of academic achievement as a source of familial pride, it further complicated the participants' experiences. They felt pressured to spend even more time attempting to make up for their difficulties learning in a secondary language. Additionally, all participants expressed frustrations about their academic transition experiences, which entailed adjusting to what they described as the American way of learning (e.g., essay style examinations, group work assignments, and self-directed assignments). The results of this study support the previous research relating to the academic stressors CIS experience while studying in the U.S. (Liao & Wei, 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Many of the participants had trouble understanding the cultural references and idioms used by American students to explain concepts related to their assignments, which compounded their academic and cultural stressors. Moreover, the shift to self-directed assignments left some participants lost because they no longer had professors pressuring them to complete daily assignments and readings. The combination of these experiences resulted in continual stress with one participant, Lin, who was a semester away from graduating exclaiming, "How do I adjust? I'm still adjusting."

Feeling Really Stressed

Feeling stressed and managing multiple stressors simultaneously was a significant factor in the participants' transition experience. The results of this study corroborate the previous literature about multiple stressors CIS encounter throughout their time in the U.S. (Bertram et al., 2014; Liao & Wei, 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2011). The participants shared some methods they used to manage their stress levels, including listening to music and employing time management strategies to counteract their academic stress.

Also, three of the five participants referenced participating in physical activities like basketball, working out, and riding a bike as effective stress relievers. The findings support researchers' assertions that inclusion of physical activities in students' stress management regimes are beneficial because it provides a physical outlet for stress relief, while increasing

opportunities to be socially active (Owens & Loomes, 2010). However, even with some stress coping skills in place, they internalized some stress that impacted their physical and mental wellbeing. When discussing stress, participants shared that they had experienced feelings of exhaustion, sickness, insomnia, and even missing menstrual cycles.

The lone participant, Hua, who made no mention of concrete stress management techniques, instead focused on the mentality he used for his stress management, "I turn my focus on my today and tomorrow and I feel something that you saw would be a problem would not be a problem any longer." This statement is significant because it highlighted an important mental shift that all the participants described as needing to remain optimistic about their social, academic, and professional situations, regardless of how much they admitted to struggling in all these areas, which has not been mentioned in previous literature.

Importance of Social Support

An area where the participants hoped they might make some meaningful social connections was in the university classroom. Unfortunately, meeting new people in the classroom and through group work assignments did not elicit any lasting friendships between the participants and domestic students. While this outcome could be because some CIS are concurrently navigating multiple cultural adjustments when they are involved in group work with domestic students (Liao & Wei, 2014; Smith & Khawaga, 2011), these situations reflect the willingness of the participants to create a community

Participants noted that upon arrival to campus they sought the company and support of other CIS who had been in the country longer. This finding supports previous researchers' claims that connecting with more experienced co-national students is beneficial in the early stages of transition because they offer necessary support (Lin, 2006; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Yan and Berliner (2011) indicated that support from co-national students, although helpful early on, hinders social integration and cultural learning due to the dependence on co-national students as primary support systems. Min confirmed this when she stated, "I live with Chinese people and just speak Chinese all the day." However, one participant's strategy of using CIS who had already been in the country for a while to branch out, and make more domestic friends was not consistent with the findings presented in previous research. This anomaly was not explored in detail in this study but may warrant a deeper look to see if there may be more ways to facilitate integration of CIS through their more established peers and their peers' domestic friends.

The participants all mentioned that all the extra time they invested to achieve academic success left little time for establishing meaningful connections with domestic students. The results of this study reflected previous literature that found many CIS expend a considerable amount of time trying to overcome their academic stressors to be academically successful rather than participating in social activities, which have been shown to significantly reduce acculturative and academic stress (Liao & Wei, 2014). Furthermore, the participants did not benefit from the potential socialization opportunities of classroom group work, which is an integral part of the American collegiate experience, because it involved simultaneous cultural adjustments, which are all considerable sources of stress, such as educational environment, language, cultural references, and communication style.

Uncertainty about University-to-Work Transition

Navigating multiple, concurrent obstacles (e.g. language, academics, and visa) contributed to feelings of uncertainty and stress for the participants as they prepared to transition from university to work. The primary reason that the participants in this study came

to the U.S. was to increase their employability in the U.S. and China, so transitioning successfully into a career was crucial to their overall feelings of accomplishment in relation to their academic experience. This finding supports previous research that positively correlates CIS' academic and professional achievements with feelings of positive affect and self-worth (Liao & Wei, 2014).

The participants who planned to remain in the country seemed anxious when they discussed the process of attempting to transition from a student visa to a work visa. This anxiety about the transition led to the participants counting on extending their undergraduate education or going to graduate school so they could remain on the student visa status. Yet despite this anxiety and stress, the participants seemed optimistic that things would work out. One participant, Yin, who was graduating two weeks after the individual interview, seemed particularly confident about the transition from university to work, but he still mentioned that he had applied to three graduate programs as a backup plan. This highlights that even though many of the participants seemed outwardly optimistic about their chances of securing internships and employment opportunities, they all had spent considerable time developing backup plans in the event their first option was not realized.

Implications for Counseling

The results of this study accentuate the participants' lack of awareness about support services available to them on university campuses, which may be true for CIS on other campuses as well. In times of need, the participants relied on the staff of their international program office or co-national faculty and students, all of whom may not have an adequate understanding of the support services the participants needed, especially in the area of mental health. By not having a clear understanding of the support services that are available to all students on college campuses, some CIS may begin to feel isolated, resulting in a diminished self-efficacy, which could negatively impact their ability to remain optimistic throughout their transitional experiences.

The results also highlight that college and career counselors may not be identifying CIS as being an at-risk population and may suggest that this problem could extend to other campuses with CIS populations. Chen, Liu, Zhao, and Yeung (2015) posit that CIS arrive in the U.S., "at an age when they are particularly vulnerable to the onset of common psychiatric disorders and their sequelae, including poor academic performance, absenteeism, and self-harm" (p. 879). Because the participants were inadequately presented with counseling as a resource during their orientation, they are missing a service that could help to decrease their sense of isolation and mitigate feelings of anxiety and depression that typically accompany cultural adjustments. Moreover, like the participants in this study, some CIS struggle with communication, homesickness, acculturative stress, and social connectedness that contribute to being in a state of chronic stress, and they should be considered an at-risk population.

Thus, counselors working with international student populations may consider using the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (IS-Wel; Myers & Sweeney, 2004; Myers & Sweeney, 2005) as a way of conceptualizing the experiences, stressors, and support systems of the students they service. When IS-Wel was utilized with other college student populations, counselors were able to recognize individuals' strengths and use them to improve functioning and overcome deficiencies to assist students in experiencing positive changes (Watson, 2015). Using the IS-WEL could translate as a viable method for supporting some CIS in maintaining an optimistic mindset while experiencing greater overall wellness during their transitional experiences in the U.S. It would also seem that using IS-WEL could translate to other international student populations on university campuses as well.

In relation to the IS-WEL (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) the participants' responses could suggest that they were not receiving support from their university community to develop and maintain a healthy sense of balance in all aspects of self. In specific, the participants' responses indicated their needs were not being met in respects to the development of their social self (e.g. love and friends) and essential self (e.g., cultural identity and self-care). Furthermore, the participants of this study may also be missing opportunities to maintain their optimistic mindset, which is central to the development of their coping self. Therefore, the participants' lack of balance in areas of the indivisible self may place them at-risk of developing social, emotional, and physiological symptoms that can impact their self-efficacy, which is crucial to their academic and professional success.

Based on the findings of this study, college and career counselors, on the campus where the study took place, were unsuccessful in developing groups intended to support the wellness of the international student population, which may be the case at other institutions as well. By creating counselor-led group offerings that use the Indivisible Self Model of Wellness (Myers & Sweeney, 2004) as a framework, more areas of the indivisible self can be addressed and supported throughout the international students' transition experiences. Counselor-led support groups could provide opportunities for some CIS to develop a stronger sense of community within the university setting that could assist in sustaining their optimism about their situation.

Furthermore, by incorporating domestic students into the support groups, there would also be chances for increased social interactions (i.e., development of social self) with domestic peers, which has been shown to significantly reduce acculturative and academic stress (Lértora, Henriksen et al., 2017a; Lértora, Sullivan et al., 2017b; Lin 2006; Yan & Berliner 2011). Development of groups that mix international and domestic students will also give international students opportunities to learn more about the culture, speaking styles, and interests of their domestic peers. Through the integrated group experience, some international students may have increased opportunities to express their own cultural identity, which supports the maintenance of their essential self.

Finally, the participants presented with optimistic resolve throughout the transitional stressors they encountered while studying in the U.S. and preparing to become a professional. Previous research has not homed in on the importance of CIS maintaining an optimistic mindset during their educational and professional journey in the U.S. When the transitional experiences, resulting stressors, and perception of university support are considered collectively, it appears that the participants could have benefited from mental health and wellness support services that were grounded in a holistic wellness approach to support their optimistic outlook.

Recommendations for Future Research

There is scant research that pertains to the lived experiences of CIS on university campuses in the U.S. that have been qualitatively researched (Bertram et al., 2014; Yan & Berliner, 2011). Unfortunately, I was unable to locate any qualitative research that focuses on factors impacting the university to work transitions of CIS. It warrants consideration that this phenomenon should be explored qualitatively in a multitude of settings to either corroborate or refute the findings of this study. Likewise, it would be beneficial to apply the methodology of this study to other international student populations for the purposes of assessing if there is any overlap between the experiences of CIS and other international students.

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Author Note

Ian M. Lértora is an assistant professor in Counselor Education at Texas Tech University in Lubbock, Texas. Ian has worked in various settings over the past 9 years that include trauma-focused play therapy, community counseling, college counseling, and career counseling. When working on colleges campuses Ian provides support for international student populations by providing transitional, academic, career, and mental health support. His areas of research are college student transitions, international student transitions, and developing innovative and interactive teaching strategies for counselors and counselor educators. Correspondence can be addressed directly to: ian.lertora@ttu.edu.

Jeffrey M. Sullivan is an assistant professor of counselor education at Sam Houston State University. Jeffrey has worked in various settings over the past 10 years and currently serves as program coordinator for the counseling program at Sam Houston State University. Jeffrey's research interests include counselor development, counseling supervision, play therapy, and counseling research methodology. Correspondence can also be addressed directly to: jms107@shsu.edu.

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